Seizing the Day: Student Engagement and Achievement in English Language Arts

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life."

And thus, John Keating, Robin Williams' character in "Dead Poets Society," explains the value of English Language Arts education (IMDb.com, Inc.).

While Keating was an exceptional – if fictional – teacher, many adults can point to real-life educators who made English Language Arts resonate and school relevant for them. In fact, student achievement has long been linked to mastery of reading and writing and active engagement, and those who have had a teacher like Keating know what that feels like. They understand, as Keating famously did, what it means to "seize the day."

Yet engagement leading to higher student achievement can be elusive, as evidenced by bright students who fail or those who leave school before graduating. Researchers have studied the connection between engagement and achievement for years. At the college level, data has emerged showing that final grades hinge largely on engagement (Whitmer, J., Fernandez, K. & Allen, W., 2012). In high schools, student engagement has been linked to higher performance in reading, mathematics, and science (Willms, J., 2003).

In fact, engagement in school parallels the need to be engaged later in life, and the corporate world is beginning to understand engagement as a business strategy (Yazzie-Mintz, E., 2010). It's not surprising that employers are looking at an engagement model that hinges on strong relationships leading to a more productive and profitable business – and lower employee turnover (Yazzie-Mintz, E.).

The multidimensional nature of engagement

Engagement is sometimes broken into two categories – behavioral and emotional – and can include both academic and nonacademic activities (Appleton, J., Christenson, S., & Furlong, M., 2008). But, engagement is truly multidimensional, and not always so easy to define.

In his report "Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools," Editor Fred M. Newman defines engagement this way: "The student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills or crafts that academic work is intended to promote (Newman, F., 1992, p. 12)."

Engagement can also include time on task, credits earned toward graduation, and completion of homework (Appleton, et. al., 2008). Other ways of looking at engagement can include such things as attendance and classroom participation (Appleton, et. al.).

But the idea of engagement doesn't need to be so clinical. Teachers usually know it when they see it.

"As a teacher, the favorite feeling is when the bell rings and a student has actually progressed because they've been so immersed in the activity at hand," says Lawrence Baines, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies and Professor of English Education at the University of Oklahoma. "Or, they'll say 'is the time up already? I thought we just started.' Those kinds of situations are always indicative that the students are actually immersed in the activity at hand (Baines, L., 2014, personal interview)."

The engagement gap

The bad news is that students too often are not engaged in ways that lead to higher achievement.

Students all across the country, irrespective of location, often say boredom with school prevents them from fully engaging. Many students say they're bored because the subject matter isn't interesting (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

There is also an engagement gap that has consistently been found among students based on ethnicity, race, and gender. Girls report higher engagement than boys, white and Asian students report higher levels of engagement than students of other ethnicities, and students in honors or college prep classes report higher levels of engagement than other students (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Regardless of geography or demographics, various levels of student engagement can be found in every school, with as many as one-fourth of students reporting that they do not feel engaged (Appleton, et. al., 2008). This requires educators to find new ways to make school both more interesting and relevant to those they teach. Teachers must constantly look for ways in which their students might seize every day.

How students engage

Despite the importance of reading for personal and academic development, many students appear to be avoiding it, Baines points out in his 2011 monograph "New Rules for a New Game." He cites 2009 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data showing that students were spending little of their leisure time on weekends and holidays reading; in fact, reading made up only 1 percent, on average, of student leisure time, compared to 39 percent for watching television. These are troubling statistics, given that reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for learning in every subject.

"Language Arts are foundational," Baines explained in a December 5, 2014 interview. "If you can learn the terminology of science, for example, and can discuss science coherently and express your thoughts about science, you can start achieving as a scientist. All kinds of scientists have written great books, and in fact their works are as well known as what they discovered."

When considering time on task as a measure of student engagement, there is further cause for concern. The 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement found that 77 percent of students reported spending five hours or fewer each week doing written homework (Yazzie-Mintz, E., 2010); 87 percent said they spend that same amount of time reading and studying for class, while 30 percent reported spending six hours or more each week watching TV or playing video games. More than a quarter reported spending six hours or more each week "surfing or chatting online (Yazzie-Mintz, p. 8)."

Neuroscientists have shown that the activities a person chooses can affect not only the development of that person's identity but also the physical structure of the brain. However, as Baines notes in "New Rules for a New Game," "Just because an activity has beneficial effects does not mean that students will love it (Baines, 2011, p. 3)."

One of the biggest challenges for teachers is persuading students to focus their energy on worthwhile activities rather than those that don't lead to improved learning. Baines laments the focus in many schools today on preparing students for myriad high-stakes exams as opposed to time spent exploring texts deeply and participating in classroom discussions (Baines, 2011). Students – and adults – need to feel that they are learning something that will help them connect to, and improve, their everyday lives.

How Important Are these Activities?	Not at All	A Little	Semi Important	Very Important	Top Priority
Doing Written Homework	7%	14%	33%	36%	10%
Reading/Studying for Class	9%	18%	33%	31%	9%
Reading for Self	17%	27%	32%	19%	5%
Participatimg in School-Sponsored Activities	20%	16%	23%	30%	11%
Watching TV/Playing Video Games	22%	36%	27%	10%	5%
Surfing/Chatting Online	22%	33%	28%	12%	4%
Talking on the Phone	16%	30%	30%	17%	7%
Socializing with Friends Outside of School	4%	10%	26%	42%	18%

Within Seven Days how many hours are spent on these Activities?	0	1 or Fewer	2 to 5	6 to 10	10+
Doing Written Homework	7%	32%	39%	15%	7%
Reading/Studying for Class	11%	39%	37%	10%	3%
Reading for Self	16%	38%	29%	10%	6%
Participatimg in School-Sponsored Activities	26%	18%	25%	14%	17%
Watching TV/Playing Video Games	6%	25%	38%	18%	12%
Surfing/Chatting Online	12%	27%	35%	16%	10%
Talking on the Phone	8%	34%	30%	14%	14%
Socializing with Friends Outside of School	4%	11%	33%	27%	26%

Engagement and achievement

The most immediate issue for students and teachers isn't low achievement, but student disengagement (Newman, F., 1992). Disengaged students may skip school, disrupt others, fail to hand in homework, or drop out of school altogether. Or, they may complete homework and behave in class but show little commitment or pride in their work (Newman, F., 1992).

Researchers have documented what our intuition tells us to be true: that more engagement results in higher achievement. The time a student spends on a particular task is important, but time on task is not as important as the quality of that time (Huitt, W., Huitt, M., Monetti, D., & Hummel, J., 2009). It also is clear that when students' personal interests are made part of the school program, they do better academically (Heller, R., Calderon, S., & Medrich, E., 2003).

Engagement with curriculum is not the only form of engagement that leads to student success. Researchers have found a correlation between service-learning programs and improved communication skills, sense of educational competence, improved problem-solving skills, and increased interest in academics (Heller, et. al., 2003). For example, middle and high school students who participate in service-learning tutoring programs have been found to increase their grade point averages (Heller, et. al).

Most important, students who see a purpose to their learning remain more engaged and tend to do better in school. A study of middle-school students in North Carolina, for example, found that schools implementing a career-focused program realized higher student engagement and improved test scores in both math and reading; at the high school level, students scored higher on end-of-course tests and earned more credits toward graduation (Orthner, D.).

Meeting students where they are

One way to improve student engagement is to create an environment in which students are challenged to meet high expectations but that also makes them feel comfortable asking questions (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007). This is crucial, because students who feel challenged by their work are less likely to say they are bored, or to disengage (Center for Comprehensive School Reform).

In 2007, Gretchen Mann-Erickson and Judith Martinez outlined a number of ways to better engage students, all based on the "3 As": Attendance, Attachment and Achievement.

Strategies include:

- Activities and special events for students, families, and communities
- Best educational practices based on evidence and research
- Incentives
- Instructional and/or curricular innovations
- Professional development for educators and program providers
- School policies that enhance engagement
- School-wide programs

School districts around the country have tackled the engagement issue by forming math clubs, engaging parents in reading to children in the early grades, providing after-school programs, tracking and mentoring students, developing leadership skills, and offering rewards for good attendance. (Mann-Erickson & Martinez, 2007).

In fact, ensuring student engagement often starts with attendance. Numerous factors contribute to absenteeism and truancy, and schools are challenged to develop systems of support that address barriers to learning and teaching and that help disengaged students to re-engage (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA).

One important strategy for re-engaging students is to reframe learning in ways that help the student understand why what he or she is learning is personally valuable and applicable to the student's real-life needs (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA).

"I think the most important thing is to find a context by which a student can get a point of entry and then generate curiosity," says Robert Romano. Romano, the CEO and co-founder of StudySync, who conceived his web-delivered product to increase reading, writing, and critical thinking skills and to provide a point of entry with multimedia supports. "If a student doesn't have that point of entry . . . and if you're unable to generate some curiosity, some point of reference that makes them feel it's relevant to them, you'll lose them (Romano, R., 2014, personal interview)."

Indeed, designing an accessible and relevant curriculum that incorporates students' own interests has multiple benefits, including increased interest in academics (Heller, et. al., 2003).

Students tend to do well when curricula provide attractive entry points, age-appropriate lessons, visual and auditory supports, engaging simulations that model critical thinking and textual analysis, diverse texts that provide a variety of text types, and – in today's new environment – align clearly with Common Core and National Council of Teachers of English standards (Baines, 2011).

Teacher support

The evidence is clear that teacher engagement is at least as important as student engagement. A concentration on active learning through group activities and assignments, long-term projects, hands-on activities, differentiated instructions, and lessons that draw on student experiences and interests are all hallmarks of a supportive and engaged teacher (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007).

We know that students with teachers who form supportive personal relationships with them have a more positive attitude toward school and higher satisfaction with learning (Klem, A., & Connell, J., 2004).

Students who see their teachers as creating caring and well-structured learning environments with high, clear expectations feel more engaged with school, are less likely to skip school and more likely to complete high school (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Collaboration

Collaboration within schools is important for students and fostering engagement. When students collaborate on projects, they become part of a culture of shared purpose, accountability and learning (Diaz, V., Brown, M., & and Salmons, J., 2010). Working with others can enhance critical thinking, promote social and emotional development, help students appreciate differences in others and reduce student attrition (Diaz, et. al.).

In-school collaboration as an engagement tool to improve reading achievement has also been validated through programs in which teachers and media specialists work together to emphasize the importance of reading and access to a wide range of good books (Simmons, E.). Teachers partnering with other teachers and parent-teacher collaborations also can be critical factors in student engagement (Simmons).

Successful programs to improve attendance, an essential element in achieving engagement, view the issue of collaboration as more than a school issue and rather one that affects the entire community (Smink, J. & Reimer, M., 2005).

In one such program, the involvement of community advocates who visited or made phone calls to the home helped reduce absences by 50 percent (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

In Seattle, multiple approaches are used to engage truant students and their parents. Community truancy boards facilitate agreements with the school district to improve school attendance. Additionally, courts and short-term case management provide assistance to schools and other agencies. In the first year of Seattle's collaborative program, preliminary court hearings were reduced by 57 percent, and 75 percent of youth who participated did not go on to court because of truancy (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Engaging students through technology

Today's era of rapidly advancing technology can be seen both as an opportunity for distraction and a tool for engagement. As seen in the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement, students typically spend more time watching TV, playing video games, and surfing the web or using social media than they do on reading or homework (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

"Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing," Harvard Medical School's Michael Rich told *The New York Times* (Richtel, M., 2010, para. 7). "The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens [and their] brains are going to be wired differently."

However, Romano notes that distraction is part of being human and that what might in some instances be considered aimless wandering can also often be viewed as a healthy exploration of interests.

"Exploration can be distracting and send you down paths of just entertainment, no doubt," Romano says. "But exploration is the thing that makes us curious, viable creatures on this planet, and being able to leverage that and harness it is important (Romano, 2014, personal interview)."

The secret, Romano believes, is using technology in ways that provide students with rich resources for learning and discussion and that provide teachers with a painless way to use it.

"It has to be something teachers can get comfortable with," Romano says, "something that [allows] teachers to bridge their experiences with the everyday experiences of students. That's the challenge. In a lot of cases the student is teaching the teacher about technology, and what we've done is bridge that with a tool that can be given to a teacher, and teachers can teach in traditional ways and fabricate, with flexibility a classroom that is digital and media rich."

There's no doubt that schools across the nation are investing heavily in learning technologies that capitalize on today's digital capabilities and students' proficiency with new media. In that respect, it may be comforting to note that students who have routine engagement with technology learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic faster than those who lack access. (Apple Computer Inc., 2002).

In fact, one of the most important contributions technology has made to today's learning environment is higher student engagement, resulting in better attendance and lower dropout rates. (Apple Computer Inc., 2002).

Technology today can help facilitate important English Language Arts activities such as collaborative writing, student critiques, student reflections, group presentations, and group problem-solving. (University of Wisconsin-Madison). In this way, technology can help students prepare for the workplace, which is often collaborative and dependent on innovative solutions.

Regardless of what happens in the classroom, technology today is the framework for all kinds of human interaction and personal reflection. Consider that frequent readers among both girls and boys have been declining since 2010, while the number of students reading ebooks has almost doubled (Scholastic, 2013).

An Apple Computer Inc. summary of research findings on technology's impact on student achievement reports four key areas in which integrating technology into the learning environment can pay dividends. These, cited in "The Impact of Technology on Student Achievement," include:

1. Mastering fundamental skills

Students with regular access to technology feel more engaged and spend more time learning and practicing basic tasks than they might otherwise. Improvements ranged from better reading and writing skills to higher SAT scores. Schools that provided students with home computers and modems noticed increased time on educational activities outside of school and less time watching television, resulting in better problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and improved reading, math, and computer literacy skills.

2. Becoming proficient users of technology

Studies show that after students become familiar with technology, they become proficient very quickly. These technological skills are important to future capabilities in a more technological workplace. Video and audio technology in the classroom also improve engagement by bringing learning material to life in a way that the printed page may not, and aid in the ability of students to recall basic facts and understand complex systems. One study noted an increase in the tendency of students with regular access to laptops to explore topics on their own – engagement at its best.

3. Preparing students with 21st century skills

Technology is a game changer when it comes to learning and applying new skills in school and career. Studies have further shown that in using educational technology, students tend to interact and collaborate with peers more easily, better organize their work, and use inquiry and problem-solving skills at a higher rate than other high school graduates.

4. Motivating students to higher levels of achievement

Studies have shown that students who use technology in the school environment finish high school and consider college at higher rates. Technology helps students to take charge of their own learning and to take on a greater variety of roles in the learning process, helping other students and even their teachers in the process.

While the promise of technology is real, Baines notes that "the entry point to a lot of technology is the key. It can't be too cumbersome, complex or take too long to learn the system," he says (Baines, 2014, personal interview).

Carpe diem

"Carpe, carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary."
– John Keating, *Dead Poets Society*.
(IMDb.com, Inc.).

It is clear that student engagement is a persistent challenge that has kept educators up at night over the years. Lack of engagement has many negative impacts, such as failure to progress on pace, disenchantment with learning, truancy, and decisions to drop out. However, engagement takes multiple forms and can help bring new excitement, confidence, and competence to student learning.

Keys to better student engagement include innovative ways to link learning to personal experiences or interests, collaboration in the classroom and within the community, supportive teachers and a caring educational environment, and use of technology in ways that provide students with rich, relevant, and easy-to-access resources.

The good news is this: Teachers need not be a John Keating to help make student lives extraordinary.

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